

Guide to Welcoming an Employee Returning from Medical Leave

Employers, Managers and Supervisors play a key role in the success of gradual return to work (GRTW) and return to work (RTW) plans. The GRTW process occurs in the three distinct phases outlined in this guide. The guide provides goals for each phase and useful strategies and tips to achieve the specific goal.

Phase 1: Preparation for the first day back in the workplace (before return to work)

Goal: Decrease anticipatory anxiety and setting practical goals.

There is a level of anticipatory anxiety present in Employers and Employees during the first phase of RTW. From the Employee's perspective, this stems from not knowing how the employer will react or treat them when returning. Common questions the Employee may have include, does the Employer expect me to do 100% of my job on my first day? Who has been covering me while I was away? What can I expect on my first day/week? The strategies below will assist in setting the stage for a successful RTW through communication and collaboration.

- Suggest to the Employee to stay connected to work and colleagues, such as going to coffee or lunch with co-workers ahead of the RTW. Manager could invite the Employee.
- Learn about the Employee's needs so you can support them better.
- Advise the team and address any pre-absence workplace concerns.
- Discuss how the person would like information shared with colleagues, especially changes in work (accommodated work). Respect the Employee's wishes about which information is private and which is shared with others.
- Meet with the Employee before the return to work to discuss how to support their success. This often takes the form of accommodated work. Some common accommodations are below.
 - Flexible work schedules – allow the Employee to take longer or more frequent breaks, change their working hours or do some home-based work if appropriate.
 - Restructuring for tasks – reorganize work and focus on higher priority activities.
 - Change to interpersonal communication – set time aside to ensure verbal and written instructions, expectations and responsibilities are clear.
 - Interacting with others – if an Employee is having trouble getting along with co-workers consider finding a mentor or “buddy”.
 - Handling time pressures and multiple tasks – break larger projects down into manageable tasks and meet regularly to re-prioritize tasks.

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Phase 2: Reintegration into the regular workings of the workplace (during return to work)

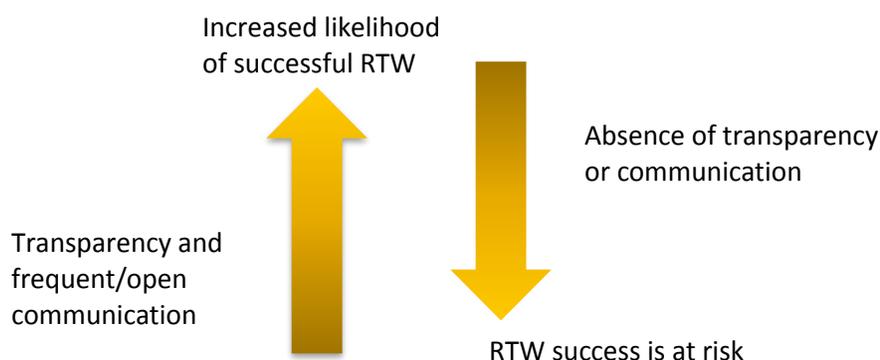
Goal: Building capacity and confidence in the workplace.

REMEMBER: The GRTW is an extension of the Employee's rehabilitation and they should use this time to find a balance between professional and personal life. Work performance expectations should be pro-rated on the number of hours worked per week.

Returning to work after an absence is similar to preparing for a race, as we need to gradually build capacity to meet increasing demands. Confidence is an important component to any successful return to work. When Employee's achieve their established daily/weekly goals, their confidence will increase as does the likelihood of a successful return to work.

- In the first week provide any training, information or resources the Employee may need to get up to speed.
- Gradually increase responsibility and workload proportional utilizing accommodations discussed in Phase 1.
- Set time aside to have status update meetings and reassess against the established goals. Advise HMC or ACM immediately if any issues arise.

NB: there is a correlation with increased transparency and communication and higher likelihood of a successful return to work.



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Phase 3: Establishing a regular work routine and autonomy (final weeks of the return to work and regular hours)

Goal: Developing autonomy and full capacity within the workplace.

Using Phase 1 and 2 as a foundation, the Employee will now be transitioning back to regular hours and duties. To ensure a sustainable return of the Employee, how and why the work is completed becomes important. The strategies below are designed to reduce stress and create a healthier work environment.

- Clarify and legitimize demands:
 - Clarify priorities, roles and responsibilities with individuals and the team.
 - Explain and discuss where the work demands are coming from and establish what is reasonable.
 - Help the Employee understand where they “fit” in the workplace – their role

- Increase control:
 - Delegate decision-making to the Employee where feasible.
 - Allow the Employee discretion in deciding how they will accomplish their work whenever reasonable to do so.
 - Effective workload management and prioritize whenever possible.



RETURN-TO-WORK TIPS

FOR MANAGERS

Read these tips to help you create a supportive and successful reintegration for employees returning to work after an absence.

UP TO ONE WEEK PRIOR TO THE EMPLOYEE'S RETURN:

- ✔ Participate in a return-to-work (RTW) meeting/call with the employee before the start of the RTW plan to outline hours, location and tasks. Take note: employees in a union may also want their union rep to be included in the meeting/call.
- ✔ Ensure any equipment or workplace accommodations will be ready for the RTW and that the employee has meaningful work to complete. Your HR Business Partner can help you to make sure you are ready for the employees return.
- ✔ Ask the employee if they would like anything to be shared with co-workers surrounding their absence and RTW while maintaining their privacy.
- ✔ When necessary, advise the team of their co-worker's RTW plans and dates. Include details on the impact to workloads and/or job duties for those co-workers affected.
- ✔ Plan for any new training and/or job shadowing to help the employee transition back to work.

DURING THE EMPLOYEE'S FIRST DAY BACK:

- ✔ Meet the employee, go for a coffee – welcome the employee back and remember to make it a positive experience.
- ✔ Review the work tasks and the RTW schedule prior to the start of work activities.
- ✔ Provide an update to the employee regarding any changes in the workplace that may have occurred during their absence; get them up to speed on any key events and/or activities taking place in the next little while.

DURING THE EMPLOYEE'S FIRST WEEK BACK TO WORK:

- ✔ Discuss and agree upon a brief, scheduled check-in period during the initial weeks after the employees return. Frequency and length of the check-in is based on preferences, availability and scheduling but should be focused on supporting the employee.
- ✔ Encourage your employee to bring to your attention any issues as they arise so that you can address them quickly.
- ✔ Remind your employee of other resources available to them during their return to work such as a “buddy,” HR, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or their Abilities Case Manager (ACM) or Health Management Consultant (HMC) at Sun Life.
- ✔ Provide the ACM or HMC at Sun Life with an update on how the employee is doing.

WEEKLY UNTIL THE EMPLOYEE HAS RETURNED TO WORK FULL TIME, WITH REGULAR DUTIES:

- ✔ Meet with the employee weekly to ensure that the RTW plan is progressing well and that the employee is able to meet the expectations within the agreement of the plan.
- ✔ If the RTW plan is not progressing as planned, contact your HR Business Partner, ACM and/or HMC at Sun Life as soon as possible to discuss options and to have their support to assist you.

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